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A repair method

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION AND PRIOR ART

The present invention relates to a repair method for components consisting of laminates of composite material with high demands upon strength. Such components may be intended for all types of uses, such as in particular for flying vehicles and space crafts, for example undercarriage lids, vertical stabilisers and wing shells of aeroplanes, or cars, bridges and so on. The reason for manufacturing such components out of laminates with several layers of fiber composite – for example carbon fibre epoxy or glass fibre polyester – having within each layer substantially parallel fibres embedded in a matrix or bed, is that a very low weight may be obtained for determined demands upon strength. For obtaining a required strength of the laminate and by that of the component against forces in all directions it is important that the laminate includes layers with different fibre directions. The layers are usually applied on top of each other so that the fibre direction of a certain layer makes an angle of 30 – 90° with the fibre direction of adjacent layers. However, it has turned out that when layers having substantially different fibre directions are applied on top of each other, pores or air enclosures are sometimes formed therebetween. These pores extend along the interface between the two layers and may have an area of several square centimetres. The quality of the individual layers of a laminate of this type, i.e. how exactly parallel the fibres thereof are with respect to each other, has recently been increased, which has accentuated the problem with said pores, since the laminate gets in

this way more tight and the air in the pores may not find any way out thereof.

5 Small pores do not as such impair the strength or resistance, but they have nevertheless to be plugged by any curable material, such as a glue, so that moisture or something else may not penetrate thereinto and they get larger and are connected to each other, which could have catastrophic consequences in the form of remarkably reduced strength of the component. Thus,
10 pores having a size above a determined level have to be repaired. A method according to the preamble of the appended claim 1 is known for this sake.

15 Before such a filling is started the component in question has been examined with respect to such pores and these have been detected and marked. The detection takes preferably place by using ultrasound, which is reflected where the pores are present. The connection path between the exterior of the laminate and the pore is then created by drilling holes, so that a channel to the
20 pore is produced. A flowing plastic or glue filling the pore is then injected and after that allowed to cure.

This way to proceed is associated with a number of problems. Fibres of the fibre composite carrying loads will be destroyed
25 through the drilling, which reduces the strength of the laminate. Furthermore, it is difficult to exactly hit the pore through drilling, so that it is necessary to drill at comparatively small intervals, such as an interval of only 3 mm, which may result in a local reduction of the strength to a level being unacceptably low in some
30 applications. A drill diameter of about 0,5 mm is normally used, which usually exceeds the diameter of a fibre of the fibre composite by a factor in the order of 100. Moreover, it is not sufficient to hit the pore through a drilling hole, but at least one additional drilling hole is required, through which the air in the pore
35 may disappear upon injection of material in the first drilling hole.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The object of the present invention is to provide a method of the type defined above, which to a large extent finds a remedy to the inconveniences mentioned above of such methods already known.

This object is according to the invention obtained by providing such a method, in which in step a) the connection path is created by exerting the laminate at least in the region of said pore to forces making slots to propagate substantially in the matrix through each laminate layer along the fibre direction of the layer.

Such slots will not influence the strength of the laminate in a noticeable degree, but they make the laminate permeable, since gas or liquid may pass through the slots, so that a connection path between the exterior of the laminate and a said pore is achieved. By the fact that the slots of laminate layers having different fibre directions will intersect each other a connection path will be established from the exterior of the laminate to each pore having a not neglectable size. The method is less complicated and may be carried out more rapidly and to a lower cost than methods already known, besides the fact that the strength reduction gets almost neglectable and it gets easier to reach and fill smaller pores. Another advantage of connection paths in the form of thin slots or fissures instead of considerably coarser drilling holes is that the flowing material may through capillary effects be sucked into the laminate and reach the pore in question.

According to a preferred embodiment of the invention the laminate is cooled in step a) at least in the region of said pore to a sufficiently low temperature for making the matrix material between said fibres to contract so much that said slots are created along the fibres. By utilising the fact that the fibres used in this type of fibre composites have a coefficient of heat expansion being nearly zero, while the corresponding coefficient is much

higher for the matrix material, the slots aimed at may be created in an extremely easy and reliable way.

5 According to another preferred embodiment of the invention the cooling is carried out to a temperature below -70°C , preferably below -150°C , in which it is particularly advantageous to apply liquid nitrogen on the laminate, which enables cooling down to about -200°C , but in certain applications could also carbon di-
10 oxide snow be used and the cooling then take place to about -75°C . It is conceivable to cool the entire component, but it would also be possible, and probably most often also desired, to restrict a region of the outer surface of the laminate right in front of a said pore and apply cooling medium on the laminate only within this restricted region. By this, the cooling gets easier to carry out
15 at the same time as matrix slots are only formed where they are really favourable.

According to another preferred embodiment of the invention the connection path is created between the exterior of the laminate
20 and a said pore by exerting the laminate to such outer forces in planes transversally to the fibre direction of the layers of the laminate that slots propagate through each layer along the fibre direction of the layer. It may for example be tried to bend a laminate with layers having two different fibre directions in planes di-
25 rected substantially perpendicular to the respective fibre direction until it starts to crackle in the laminate, which means that the matrix material come loose from the fibres and slots are formed along the fibres. It is then possible to maintain the bending forces during step b) so as to act to open the slots and facilitate
30 transport of the flowing material to the pore and remove the forces after the filling but before the curing for automatically pressing superfluous flowing material out of the slots.

35 According to another preferred embodiment of the invention the laminate is heated directly before and/or in connection with step b) at least in the region of said pore to a temperature necessary for making said flowing material to be a thinly fluid. This may for

some epoxy glues mean heating to about +50°C, while other materials may be a sufficiently thinly fluid at room temperature.

5 Other measures according to the invention for facilitating the transport of the flowing material to said pore consist in applying outer forces on the laminate in planes transversely to the fibre directions of the different layers when applying the flowing material on the outer surface of the laminate as well as applying a negative air pressure on the laminate on the opposite side thereof
10 with respect to the outer surface of the laminate to which the flowing material is applied.

A particularly advantageous material with respect to strength properties in relation to weight for components of the type in
15 question is carbon fibre epoxy, and experiments have shown that the method according to the invention is extremely suited for this material.

20 Further advantages as well as advantageous features of the invention appear from the following description and the other dependent claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

25 With reference to the appended drawings, below follows a description of preferred embodiments of the invention cited as examples.

In the drawings:

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Fig 1 is a very schematic sketch of a laminate intended to illustrate the problem to be solved by the invention,

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Fig 2 is a view from above of a component of a laminate, onto which detected pores have been marked,

Fig 3 is a light microscope photograph illustrating matrix slots created upon cooling a laminate of carbon fibre epoxy by liquid nitrogen, and

- 5 Fig 4 is a very schematic sketch illustrating how matrix slots are formed in a fibre composite material in accordance with the invention.

10 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

The problem occupying the invention will now be explained while making reference to fig 1 and 2. A part of a fibre composite laminate is very simplified shown in fig 1, which consists of individual
15 layers 1 having fibres directed substantially parallel to each other and embedded in a matrix. The fibres may for example be carbon fibres or glass fibres and the matrix any plastic, such as epoxy or polyester. It is advantageous that the fibres within one layer make an angle of $30 - 90^\circ$ with the fibres in adjacent layers. The
20 fibres in the layers 1' are then directed substantially perpendicularly to the fibres in the layers 1''.

In the case of layers of carbon fibre epoxy the thicknesses thereof is typically between 0,05 and 0,2 mm, and the number of
25 layers may for example for a wing shell of an aeroplane be about 50, and the number of layers is generally between 4 and 200.

It is shown in fig 1 how a so-called pore 2 in the form of an air enclosure has been created at the interface between two adjacent
30 layers. The height, i.e. the extension in the thickness direction of the laminate, of this pore may be in the order of 0,02 – 0,2 mm, while it may in the interface extend over a surface of several square centimetres.

35 If ultrasound is sent through the laminate it will be reflected by such pores, which may by that be detected and marked as has been done on the component shown in fig 2. It is possible to de-

termine that pores having an area below a certain size, for example 36 mm^2 , may be accepted and shall not be taken care of. This limit is dependent upon the application and may be set completely different for for instance a component of a car and
5 one of an aeroplane. The pores to be taken care of shall, as mentioned above, be filled by a flowing, curable material, such as any plastic or glue, for example epoxy glue LY5052 of two-component type.

10 According to a first preferred embodiment of the invention the laminate regions over a detected pore marked in fig 2 are restricted by any type of lateral walls and liquid nitrogen is after that poured onto the laminate in these regions and the cooling
15 achieved by that is allowed to take place during a period of time being dependent upon the thickness of the laminate and typically between 5 and 20 minutes. The matrix material will during such a cooling contract, whereas the fibres do not show any change in length depending upon temperature changes, so that thin micro
20 slots or fissures having a thickness in the order of $0,5 - 1 \text{ }\mu\text{m}$ are created along the fibres, such as shown through the black line 4 on the light microscope photograph according to fig 3 for the case of carbon fibre epoxy. The carbon fibres 5 are shown through white circles, while the matrix material 6 is grey. These
25 slots occur in the carbon fibre epoxy at intervals of about $0,5 \text{ mm}$ and the slots penetrate through the entire respective laminate layer, which here has a thickness of $0,13 \text{ mm}$, and the slots of adjacent layers will accordingly intersect each other and a connection path is formed between the exterior of the laminate and the pore in question. This is shown in fig 4.

30 In the case of carbon fibre composite material this is then heated to a temperature exceeding $+40^\circ\text{C}$, namely of about $+50^\circ\text{C}$, which may take 10 minutes – 2 hours, and the region in question of the laminate is then kept at this temperature during the application of
35 an epoxy glue which is a thinly fluid at this temperature and is injected through capillary effects and/or the gravitation into said slots during a time shorter than 1 hour. The pore in question will

be filled by this, and the glue will automatically cure after a certain time while filling the pore so repaired.

5 It is conceivable to apply outer forces on the laminate in planes transversal to the fibre directions of the different layers in connection with the injection of the flowing material so as to open the slots for facilitating the transport of the flowing material to the pore. It is also conceivable to apply a negative air pressure on the lower side of the laminate so as to facilitate this transport.

10 In an alternative embodiment of the method according to the invention the matrix slots may instead of said cooling be created by exerting the laminate to sufficiently strong outer forces in planes transversal to the fibre direction of the layers of the laminate to release the matrix material at the fibres and create slots.
15 The flowing, curable material may in such a case be applied directly in connection with the slot creation while maintaining said forces, which will then act to open the slots and facilitate the transport of the flowing material to the pore. Superfluous flowing
20 material may then by removal of said forces automatically be pressed out of the slots.

The invention is of course not in any way restricted to the preferred embodiments described above, but many possibilities to
25 modifications thereof would be apparent to a person with skill in the art without departing from the basic idea of the invention as defined in the appended claims.

30 The materials used could for example be others than those described above, and the same is valid for for example the number of layers of the laminate and the thickness of the respective layer.

35 It is neither necessary that the layers have alternatively different fibre directions, but at least two layers of the laminate have to have this, since the laminate will otherwise be extremely weak in one direction.

It is neither necessary that layers making a mutual angle through the fibre directions of exactly 90° are present, but other angles, such as 45° , are also conceivable. It would also be possible that
5 layers having more than two different fibre directions are present in the laminate.

The cooling and the application of outer bending forces may of course be combined in the method according to the invention.
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